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from the author.

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# Some Notes on the Nutmeg Graters used in Folk-Medicine

By L. F. NEWMAN





## SOME NOTES ON THE NUTMEG GRATERS USED IN FOLK-MEDICINE

L. F. NEWMAN

UP to the middle of the last century the minor ailments of life were usually dealt with in the household. The doctor was not called in for petty illnesses in the same way that he is now and domestic or folk-cures played a much greater part in ordinary life than they do today. The modern use of synthetic or naturally occurring drugs and the ease with which they can be prepared in attractive tabloid form, with the provision of slot machines for packets of common medicines, has led this country into that mild form of the drug habit which has been a widely spread characteristic of the American and German nations. It has been stated on good authority<sup>1</sup> that any ordinary German might be taking several different patent medicines at one time; and the pernicious habit has spread to this country in recent years.

The universal provision of dentures and a knowledge of ordinary dietary laws has done much to relieve the chronic indigestion and flatulence which was extremely common in this country especially among elderly and edentulous women and the present generation may be interested in a practice in general use in this country up to seventy or eighty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Nearly every middle-aged woman carried a nutmeg which she grated over her food and drink as a carminative to relieve flatulence and dyspepsia. They were carried in the pocket in small wooden or metal cases fitted with a grater at one end so that the remedy was always at hand. The large bag pockets worn by women under their voluminous skirts and petticoats held much more than the modern vanity bags and ladies of past generations were able to carry more oddments on their persons than the modern woman can today.

Nutmeg cases were usually made of silver and were often fine examples of the silversmith's art but the poorer classes used wooden receptacles carved by rural craftsmen to represent an acorn in its cupule or some other natural object. The boxes were about an inch or so in height, large enough to contain a full sized nutmeg, and fitted with lids under one of which was a small grater.

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication. Dr. R. A. Williams, sometime Professor of German at Cambridge University.

<sup>2</sup> See Cambridge Public Library Record Jan. 1940. "Some notes on Folk Medicine in the Eastern Counties." L. F. Newman.

Plate IV shows two sets : (1), (2) and (3) are wooden boxes, the middle one being a fine example in hard black wood carved to represent a bottle. The remainder are made of silver. (4) is a finely chased heart-shaped case and the open lid shows the position of the grater. (5) is a small egg-shaped example and, as the grater is in the middle, it can only contain half a nutmeg. (6) is a very unusual type, the grater is cylindrical and protected by a sheath shown on the right. The lid is shown on the left. (7) and (8) are silver cases representing a barrel and an acorn respectively. (8) is finely engraved but much worn with many years of use and polishing. It will be seen that the wooden boxes are much larger and more clumsy than the metal ones. (2) is nearly three inches high while (1) and (3) are coarsely made and bulky. These examples form a small but representative collection in the writer's possession. (4) was carried by his grandmother for many years and some were formerly in the possession of Miss Stock of Appleshaw, Hants. Other collections exist but are unknown to museums. Boxes may occasionally be seen in antique shops. Gold boxes were sometimes carried but the high decorative value of silver has always led to its use where ornamental work is concerned, gold being merely a mark of ostentation and wealth.

A parallel is afforded by the snuff boxes once universally carried by men. The commoner and cheaper types were made of wood or metal but the usual pattern was a silver one although for state occasions gold, china or porcelain snuff boxes were used. Snuff boxes have been very fully collected and described but up to the present time the nutmeg-grater, of equal interest and exclusively a feminine possession, seems to have escaped notice and the writer feels that the examples given may be of some interest to students of folk-medicine.

Nutmeg-graters were an important feature of social life from the time of the general importation of spices from the East Indies. The Nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*) was known to the Arabian physicians and was, originally imported overland, into Europe.<sup>3</sup> The trees have been introduced into Brazil, the Philippines and the West Indies from Madagascar (sp. *M. acumata*) but all the species are very restricted in their area of growth and trade supplies come mainly from the Banda Islands. The common East Indian species is grown to a limited extent in India, Brazil, Sumatra and Malacca but with only partial success.<sup>4 5</sup>

The nutmeg has always enjoyed a reputation as a carminative.

<sup>3</sup> Pickering, *Chron. Hist. Plant* (quoting Aetius and Symeon Sethus).

<sup>4</sup> Sturtevant. Notes on edible plants. <sup>5</sup> Pickering, *Chron. Hist. Plant*, 603.



Dodoens <sup>6</sup> says: "this nut is found principally in the Île of Bandan which is in the Indian sea: they grow there wild in everie wood verie plentifully as Lewse the Roman writeth . . . the nutmegge doth heate and strengthen the stomache which is cold and weake. . . . It is also good against the paine and windines of the bellie and against the stoppings of the lieur and milt."

Gerarde and Johnson <sup>7</sup> say "nutmegs boiled in aqua vitae . . . cure all pains proceeding of windy and cold causes" . . . "cureth all gripings of the belly proceeding of windinesse."

Pomet <sup>8</sup> says "the nutmeg is likewise a commodity which none but the Dutch are masters of because it is cured nowhere but in the Îsles of Nero, Lontour, Pouleay, Rosgain, Poleron, Granapuis and in the great island of Banda in Asia, not elsewhere." "Four or five drops [of distilled oil] is a Dose in any proper Vehicle; wherein it becomes cephalick, neurotick, stomachick, cordial, hepatick, uterine, and alexipharmick; good against all cold diseases of the Head, Nerves, Womb, etc. expells Wind, griping of the Guts and Sickness of Heart."

The use of possets as evening drinks was very general and these nearly always contained large amounts of ground nutmeg and other spices. Negus, purl, and other strong and stimulating drinks were usually heavily spiced and were regarded as being carminatives in addition to their alcoholic properties. The aromatic substances in the spice were supposed to correct the effect of alcohol and did, to some extent, reduce the flatulence and dyspepsia resulting from such stimulating liquids.

The nutmeg has therefore played no inconsiderable part in the social life of both town and country people and the accompanying photograph affords some record of an interesting but now forgotten example of folk-medicine and of the craftsmen's work.

It must not be thought that there were no patent medicines in the past. The many advertisements quoted by writers on quack medicines <sup>9</sup> indicate how prevalent was the use of quack nostrums in Stuart and Georgian times. A preparation of nutmeg was known as Duke's water and there were cures for all diseases and ills of the flesh. These were sold chiefly by the itinerant pedlars who played such an important part in country life and no doubt the middle-aged woman added her pet nostrum to the load of oddments she carried in her pocket.

There were many other articles in common use which were carried on

<sup>6</sup> New Herbal. Eds. 1578, 1585 and 1619 (trans. H. Lyte).

<sup>7</sup> Herbell. Ed. 1636.

<sup>8</sup> *History of Drugges*, 3rd ed. 1737.

<sup>9</sup> C. J. S. Thompson. *The Quacks of old London*, also *The Mystery and Art of the Apothecary* and many other writers on the subject.

PLATE IV



NUTMEG GRATERS IN FOLK-MEDICINE





the person. Women were heavy snuff-takers, there are many references to the habit in the works of the early Victorian writers and a number of historical cases are quoted in the many histories of smoking.<sup>10</sup> Snuff taking was the only form of the tobacco habit permitted in churches and other places of religious worship and it was effectual against the many smells of town and country. Women also carried vinaigrettes which contained aromatic substances absorbed on sponges used to recover sufferers, real or imaginary, from the "vapours" or from fainting fits. Failing sight necessitated the use of spectacles and the old-fashioned silver rimmed glasses which may occasionally be seen today in antique shops and folk museums occupied a very considerable space. So that the Georgian and early Victorian country-woman carried quite a considerable number of bulky objects in her pocket which must have been rather inconvenient in volume. (The bag pocket was about 2 feet deep and 1 foot wide. It was tied round the waist and hung nearly to the knees).

It will be remembered that Mrs. Betsy Prig<sup>11</sup> purchased a salad consisting of a large onion, three large slices of beetroot, a handful of mustard and cress, a prong or antler of celery, a trifle of the herb known as dandelion, three bunches of radishes and a lettuce described as looking like a limp umbrella. For this collection she gave twopence on condition that the vendor should get it all into her pocket which operation was duly carried out before a large and admiring audience. Dickens did not overstate the possibilities of Mrs. Prig's pocket.

<sup>10</sup> Penn. *The Soverane Herbe* (quoting the *Spectator* 1712). Count Corti, *A History of Smoking*. Apperson, *The Social History of Smoking*, and many other writers.

<sup>11</sup> Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

## COLLECTANEA

### THE SEVEN PLANETS

IN the Middle Ages, as is well known, it was thought that seven planets revolved round the earth; they were the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Middle English verse, when referring to them, records many beliefs that were prevalent. Thus, the compiler of the *Early South English Legendary*, in a fairly comprehensive account of the science of his day, tells how there are eight firmaments, the uppermost being the right heaven, which contains the stars. In each of the seven below is one planet; in order from the highest to the lowest we have Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, the Moon. Their names were found through great wit of clergy. They have great power on earth, on weather, fruit, and man's birth. The days of the week take their names from these planets, either in English or Latin. Mars and Saturn are evil in their power; therefore men shun beginning any work on Saturdays and Tuesdays. He then turns to the Sun, who is, among the planets, as is a king among men—to counsel them, i-wis-. All these planets have light from *her*, as you may see by the Moon, which shines by reflected light just as clear water reflects sunlight. (The *Life of Alisaunder*, too, correctly attributes the light of the moon to the reflection of sunlight.<sup>1</sup>) Then follows a description of the moon's phases. By these phases of the moon, you can tell that the sun is shining all the time, whether it be above or below the earth.

He gives next some details of the relative sizes of the sun, moon, and earth, together with their distances. The sun is 165 times greater than the earth and the earth nine times greater than the moon. The moon seems to be greater than it really is, because it is near to us. The sun is more than three times higher from us than the moon. The distance from the earth to the highest heaven is great; if a man could walk 40 miles and something more each day, he would not reach the stars in 8000 years; had Adam at his first creation started to walk 40 miles daily, he would still be short of heaven by a thousand miles and more. How should we—so long after Adam's time—reach heaven? Yet a good soul, without the weight of flesh and blood, can travel after death to heaven faster than the lightning. At the end of the description of the sun's power, the *Legendary* tells how it draws up water and earth, from which in certain conditions come lightning, rain, snow, and dew. The ebb and flow of the tides are due to the "kind of the moon." One other point in the description may be noted—Mercury is seldom seen by us. (This planet is never so far as 30 degrees from the sun; this makes it hard to see it, and the remark about its visibility shows accurate observation of a real fact.<sup>2</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> E.S.E.L. xlvi. 394 ff. *Life of Alisaunder*, 293–6.

<sup>2</sup> E.S.E.L. xlvi. 483 ff.



